She stared at him.

Katniss knew that he knew she was staring, because the back of his neck was turning red, and the part of his profile that was visible to her was also dark with an almost berry colored flush. His fair skin had betrayed him from kindergarten to eleventh grade, and she’d be lying if she said that it hadn’t fascinated her for over a decade now. A glance down at her perpetually olive-toned skin confirmed that she had never successfully blushed a day in her life.

She sucked her teeth and willed him to open the folded square of paper that she had deftly tossed onto his desk a few moments before, inordinately proud of how accurate her flick had been considering that he sat across and one desk in front of her.
Then again, she had always been the champion of folded-paper football in her crew of friends. *If people only knew what lame things really happen at the popular parties,* she thought.

“Pssst. What are you even *doing* right now?” Glimmer asked, one perfectly sculpted eyebrow lifting upwards. “Why are you writing notes to him?”

Katniss scowled, her eyes darting over to see if he had heard. If possible, his neck was turning an even darker shade of red.

“You’re so loud and rude,” she hissed, shooting a middle finger at her friend.

“So?” Glimmer yawned, holding up the back of her iPhone and staring intently at the small reflective Apple logo.

“You can see maybe one eyeball in that thing,” Katniss said dryly, momentarily distracted from her prey. “What’s the point?”

“It’s a hot eyeball,” she shrugged, lowering the angle of the phone to analyze one perfectly whitened tooth.

Katniss laughed despite herself. “Okay,” she said with a roll of her eyes.

Glimmer tossed her phone into her purse, turning in her desk with one sudden movement. “No, but seriously,” she said, leaning forward conspiratorially and lowering her voice, “why exactly are you flirting with Peeta Mellark?”

“I need his help,” she replied quietly, her lips flattening at this line of questioning. “And I *am not* flirting.”

“Oh, yes you are,” Glimmer smiled knowingly. “It makes sense now, though,” she added thoughtfully. Katniss felt a stab of annoyance at her insinuation, as if using Peeta for something like his A+ average was common and normal.

“Does it?”

Her sarcasm was lost on Glimmer. “Yeah, but you should know…” she trailed off, her eyes darting to the back of Peeta’s head before ripping out a sheet of paper from her notebook. She frantically jotted down a note and thrust the paper towards her with one manicured hand.

*He’s only been in love with you, for like, ever.*

Katniss glared down at the paper, scrawling a short response before balling it up and tossing it back onto Glimmer’s desk.

**Shut up.**

*It’s true, bitch.*

**No.**

*Um, okay. He used to follow you home from school.*

*We were eight.*
He brought you cookies.

He has brought everyone cookies. His dad is a baker!

Your fucking name was always written on yours! In green icing!

Your point?

Whatever favor you’re trying to get from Peeta Mellark is gonna have consequences. Just sayin!

Katniss crumpled the paper and shoved it into her bookbag. She turned back around to face Glimmer, who was busy pantomiming a blow job with startling accuracy.

“Knock it off,” she said flatly, glad that they had the last two seats in the very back corner of the classroom. When the bell rang a moment later, she felt a mix of both relief and anxiety as she stared at Peeta’s back. Ever prepared, he had already started packing away his notebook and textbooks, and as her eyes raked over the polished wood of his desk, it became clear that the little square of paper she had thrown onto it earlier was nowhere to be seen.

Katniss bit her lip. Had he read it already? He had to have ninja-like precision and skill to do it while she had been writing to Glimmer.

She stood up and hesitated at his desk, waiting to see if he would stop and turn around to talk to her. He didn’t. Were his movements a little jerkier? Why was he avoiding eye contact all together?

“Come on,” Glimmer said impatiently, tapping her heel against the floor as she waited by the door.

With one more disappointed glance at Peeta’s back, she moved away to follow her friend into the hallway.

She was getting pissed off.

Her anxiety from earlier was swiftly turning into frustration, and she couldn’t help the constant looks she was shooting in his direction. Why hadn’t he approached her today? Why didn’t he at least text her? She left her number on the paper. Didn’t she at least deserve to hear a “no” from him?

She ignored the little voice in the back of her head that was saying she didn’t deserve anything, and focused on her anger instead. She watched as Peeta smiled that stupid gentle smile at Delly Cartwright, as he slid a foil wrapped package across the table in the other girl’s direction. Cookies with her name on them, I bet, she thought grimly.

“Katniss, why are you squeezing that roll?” Cato asked warily, eyeing her from across the table as if she were a feral animal. “That shit is super dead already.”

She shrugged and dropped it’s mashed, fist-shaped form onto her tray.

He followed her line of sight and scoffed. “Why are you staring at that table of losers?”
“She’s got a thing going on with Peeta Mellark,” Glimmer said in a bored tone, winking at Katniss when she shot a deadly stare her way.

“Ha! Doughboy? The fat nerd?”

“Shut up,” Katniss snapped, watching Peeta. “You’re ten times bigger than he is. He’s not fat.”

“Not anymore,” Clove Barker chimed in, smiling nastily. “But, ohmygod. Remember that time he split his pants in gym class freshman year?”

The tabled dissolved into laughter, causing dozens of eyes in the cafeteria to look their way—including Peeta Mellark’s. He flushed when he realized that her entire table was staring at him, and he looked down at the table a moment later.

“You guys are so mean,” Annie Cresta said, shaking her head. “And Clove, I saw you checking him out last week when he bent down to pick up his backpack. Don’t even try to pretend like you didn’t.”

“Shut up!” Clove grimaced, slouching down in her seat when a chorus of jeers and laughter resounded from their friends. Katniss stared at her. “What?” the other girl hissed at her.

If she wasn’t so wrapped up in her prior irritation, she would stop and analyze her burst of anger towards Clove. Instead, she stood up abruptly and walked away with purpose. A few people at other tables waved a tentative hello at her, and she shot a tense smile their way.

Katniss stopped when she reached his table, suddenly a little uncertain as a handful of hostile faces turned her way.

"Peeta." She ignored the looks of his friends and focused on the boy in front of her instead, the only person looking down at the table instead of at her. She cleared her throat when he didn’t respond. Peeta steadfastly looked at his lunch.

“Hey,” she demanded, shifting on her feet. She felt acutely aware of all the eyes staring her down. “Are you seriously ignoring me right now?”

“Fuck off,” suggested Johanna Mason, running a hand through her short dark hair.

“Excuse me?” Katniss’ mouth dropped open. She never really had any love for Johanna, but it’s not as if they ever had a negative confrontation before.

Peeta looked at her in alarm. “Jo, wait—”

“No!” She threw a hand up at him, staring at Katniss. “Can’t you see he doesn’t want to talk to you?” the other girl continued ruthlessly. She sounded as furious as Katniss felt.

“Look,” Katniss started, but was interrupted.

“No, you look, you snotty bitch. You think you can just ignore his existence for years—” She paused with a sneer before continuing, “Oh, except to mock him, and then just walk over here and act as if he owes you anything?”

“What?” she sputtered, deflated and speechless. Mock his existence? She had never. She could never.
Katniss looked around the table and saw that even Delly Cartwright’s normally cheerful face was a closed off mask. Blank and unforgiving. She looked down at Peeta and sucked up her pride. “I really need your help,” she said to his blond curls, and was horrified at the way her voice wavered at the end. Jo snorted.

“I’m sorry for all the things that I did to make you hate me,” she said stiffly. At that, his eyes finally dragged up to meet hers. She felt paralyzed as she stared into the wells of blue. Oh my god. So blue. Wait, was she blushing? Is this what blushing felt like? She felt ashamed and unworthy and terrible. This was such a bad idea.

“I’m just, I’m sorry. Never mind. I’ll go,” she said rapidly, turning around so fast that she wobbled on her feet, causing her to slip on a slick patch of linoleum floor…

…and bust her ass in front of fifty people, at least.

“Wipe out!” Cato shouted from across the room. Even her friends were tripping out at her literal downfall. She sat up, and a pale hand dusted with lightly golden hair appeared in front of her face. She looked up to see Peeta’s unreadable expression, ignoring his help and instead standing up quickly on her own. She moved towards her table of friends. So-called friends, at least.

“I told you she was a bitch,” she heard Johanna say as she walked away. She didn’t hear Peeta’s response.

“Don’t be mad!” Glimmer said through mouthfuls of laughter, exchanging a look with Clove. “That was just so fucking funny.”

“Fuck you,” said Katniss, grabbing her bookbag.

“Where are you going?” Glimmer yelled at her back, but she ignored the calls of her friend. “We have twenty minutes left!”

Katniss pushed her way through the double doors and stalked down the hallway, making a swift right and then left. She stopped when she arrived at the mostly unused stairwell that lead to a part of the school that was perpetually “under construction.” It was a perfect place to get away, and she utilized it often.

She gently laid her backpack down on the bottom step, her body following its descent a moment later. She was just unzipping the bag when a shadow fell over her.

“I don’t hate you,” said the shadow softly.

She glared at his shoes.

“Good for you,” she replied sarcastically.

He cleared his throat. “I’m just saying. It’s— it’s laughable that you would think that.”

“Why?” She stared at the zipper of her bag, at the ragged edge of her nails that Glimmer constantly bitched about. “You wouldn’t even acknowledge me today, your friend called me a snotty bitch, and then you laughed when I fell.”

“I did not laugh at you,” Peeta said firmly, sitting down next to her without asking permission. “I
didn’t call you a bitch, either.”

“Yeah, but you agree with her.” He was silent.

Katniss continued, more hesitantly this time. “You think I mocked your existence. I didn’t.”

She looked over and watched as he played with his fingers. “Okay,” he finally said.

“I never did that, Peeta,” Katniss stressed, sitting up straighter and trying to catch his eye. He looked everywhere but at her. “I would never. You know that, right?” She waited in agony.

A moment passed. “Your friends are awful,” he said instead.

“I know,” she muttered, rubbing her hands on her jeans. She thought about all the awful things they said and did to people in the past, about everyone who wasn’t one of them. How tired she was of it all, how disappointed her father would be in her.

“Then why do you…” he trailed off, his guileless blue eyes meeting hers for a moment before darting away.

“Everyone needs friends.”

“I was your friend.”

She let out a breath and looked down. “You were a boy. Glimmer offered me a unicorn pencil.” She glanced up and met his disbelieving stare. They cracked up. She allowed herself to lean against him slightly, the moment lighter.

“Well, as long as you got a fair deal out of it,” he joked, but there was no mistaking the wistfulness in his tone.

“Glimmer said you are in love with me,” she blurted out, horrified at her own question. Still, she wanted to hear it for herself.

He burned with the berry-red shade she found so compelling, so fascinating, yet he met her stare fearlessly. She could not tear her eyes away. “I worship you,” he said frankly.

Her eyes went as wide as dinner plates.

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” he muttered. She poked him in the side. "But I do.”

“Then why wouldn’t you help me?” she asked, ignoring the magnitude of his confession for the moment. One thing at a time. “Why did you ignore my note?”

He played with the double-knotted shoelaces of his sneakers. “I thought you were screwing with me,” he replied, honesty coloring his words. “You haven’t really spoken to me since fourth grade.”

She bit her lip, hard. “I’m sorry.”

“Why?”
It was a loaded question. Somewhere, a clock ticked loudly. The laughter of her classmates echoed down a distant corridor. He waited patiently.

“My dad died that year,” she finally said, swallowing painfully. Peeta’s hand found its way to hers. Warm. Steady. Peeta. She all at once felt nine years old again. “I was playing at your house. Looking at bugs under the microscope, I think. Dead wasps and stuff,” she stopped and met his eyes. He nodded. “I remember it because your mom got so pissed off that we were playing inside, but it was raining—”

“Cats and dogs,” he finished thickly, echoing a saying that her father used to say constantly.

She bowed her head. "Yes."

“I remember,” said Peeta, his eyes closing briefly.

“My mom wanted me to come home early before the weather got too bad, but I refused. Dad drove over to get me instead, and he…” She choked at the last bit, her words trailing off into a squeak instead.

One of the worst wrecks Panem County had ever seen. Her father’s truck had been unrecognizable. His casket had been empty.

“Katniss…”

“No, I- I’m sorry,” she gasped, the dam finally breaking. "I was so mad at you, Peeta. You were just a little kid, and every time I looked at you, it reminded me of that day. Of my dad. Of how it was all my fault."

His grip on her hand tightened, an anchor in the storm. She pulled their interlocked fingers into her lap, staring down at their hands.

“You were just a little kid, too.” His voice was soothing, comforting, like he was speaking to a wounded animal rather than a damaged teenage girl. "What happened wasn’t your fault, Katniss."

“It wasn’t yours, either.” Her voice was a quiet raspy thing, raw with regret. “I knew that. As we got older, I felt so terrible. So fucking horrible. I didn’t know how to fix it.” She squeezed his fingers. “I was wrong to cut you off. You were my best friend.”

She turned her tear-stained face up to his pleadingly, like a dandelion begs the sun. He was looking down at her so sweetly, so kindly. If she just leaned up, ever so slightly…just like that…

Their lips brushed, and she felt an electric burst of current shoot through her veins.

He pulled back quickly, regretfully, breaking the spell. “Katniss. This is a bad time for you.”

“I’m sorry,” she muttered, turning away. She moved to pull her hand back, too, but he held firm.

“Don’t do that,” he said gently. This forgiveness was more than she deserved. "What do you need my help with?"

She blinked for a moment. “Oh.” She pulled her hand away again, and this time he let her. She felt the loss keenly, and one glance up at his expression showed he felt the same. She finished unzipping her bag, gingerly lifting a large, square book from its confines and into her lap.
She looked over and saw the instant recognition on Peeta’s face. His very handsome face. *Stop that.*

“The plant book!”

“The plant book,” she confirmed, a half-smile on her lips.

“May I?” He gestured towards the book.

She handed it to him carefully. “Of course.”

He handled it gently, reverently. She felt a warmth, a deep fondness that had never really gone away, spread from her heart to her toes before finally prickling behind her eyes. Peeta held her father’s legacy in his hands as if he loved it. She knew all at once, with definitive certainty, that she was right to trust him with this.

She only hoped it wasn’t too late to ask.

Katniss watched as he flipped through the pages, the pressed flowers and leaves crackling as he gently moved through the book.

“I remember your dad telling me about your name,” he said suddenly, tracing a three-pronged flower so lightly that he was more drawing figures in the air than anything else. Careful. So careful. “He said: *Son,*” Peeta adopted a deep tone, “*if you ever find yourself in a pinch, just find Katniss. She’ll help you out.*”

“Shut up,” she laughed, both stunned and moved.

“True story,” he said solemnly, looking over at her briefly. “Duck potato.” He smiled down at the pages.

His face dropped suddenly. “Oh no!” Peeta exclaimed in dismay, a corner of a long-fruited anemone -thimbleweed, really- crumbling away as he turned a page. He met her eyes anxiously. “I’m so sorry, Katniss.”

“No, it’s okay,” she reassured him, placing a hand on his knee. They both stared at it a moment. She left it there.

“Anemone cylindrica,” she said quietly, leaning over to peer at the book. Her braid brushed his arm, and she pretended not to see him shiver. “Native American tribes used these leaves for burns. My dad used to say that as clumsy as I was around fire, it would come in handy someday.”


“You’re amazing,” he said. She coughed, inordinately pleased at his praise.

“This,” Katniss waved her hand over the damaged leaf, “is why I need your help.” She stopped and peered at him. He nodded at her encouragingly. She continued, “The book is falling apart. I’m scared that it’s not going to last very long. And it’s definitely not going to last forever. I guess, I was just wondering if you…”

“Yes?”
“If maybe you would illustrate it for me,” she finished shyly. “Um. Into a new plant book. One that will last. I thought I could paste in the handwritten parts from my dad above your drawings.”

“Katniss. That’s a great idea.” She beamed at him. “You trust me with this?”

“You’re the best artist I know,” she said simply. “And you knew my dad. He loved you.”

Peeta blinked down at the book rapidly. “I’ll do it. Of course I will,” he said, closing the book gingerly.

She smiled widely and opened her mouth, but he continued, “On one condition.”

“What is it?” she asked. “Anything.”

“You have to work on it with me,” he said softly, nudging her knee with his own—the one that she was clutching with her hand. She looked into his eyes and saw new beginnings, a promise that things could once again be good between them.

_Better_, she hoped. _Best._

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End Notes

I wrote this almost a year ago for PiP, but I thought I should bring it over here for archiving purposes. Fluff definitely isn't my forte.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!